

Reforming a Mindset by Roy Malone



Roy Malone

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My new job looked great on paper, head of Logistics Services at Marshall Space Flight Center, but I had to wonder when I arrived did they expect me to manage an office or perform miracle cures?

Fortunately, I had great support from upper management for my reforms. My new boss was new also and had warned me about the effort required to turn things around. I needed her support because what I found on close examination was not encouraging. Most disturbing to me was the way people were being stretched beyond their limits. Many people were doing things in areas where they hadn't been trained. Not surprisingly, they were unhappy. Morale was so low I felt like I needed a life support system to keep it from expiring altogether.

That was only a routine examination. Cut inside and I discovered an organization damaged by years of broken processes and neglect. A number of procedures hadn't been changed since 1989. Just imagine a property pass system in today's world that doesn't provide for the long-term loan of laptop computers. Maybe that was okay in 1989, when few laptops were going in and out of the Center, but in 1998 you're a long way from working faster, better, cheaper when people can't get their mobile equipment in and out of their offices without obtaining a new property pass every quarter.

The first step was going to be revitalizing my coworkers. There was no way I could reform this office by myself. I had to convince them that the status quo was unacceptable, which shouldn't be hard, but the tough part would be getting them to see WE could change it—and not just because it was good for the image of the Center. This would make everyone's life better. Complaints would decrease, the processes would run smoother, and, most important of all, their jobs would be easier.

"Together, we're going to change the way people take care of their property at Marshall," I declared, sounding the battle cry. By saying this with conviction, I got enough people to take me seriously and the others were at least willing to fol-

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low along.

What I prescribed was a forward-looking approach. I said it doesn't matter what happened before, nor does it matter who was to blame. To emphasize that we were starting out fresh, I did something they had never done before at Marshall. I implemented a Departmental Employee-of-the-Quarter program for people to see that doing good work had its own reward.

Although MSFC did not have a formal Employee of the Quarter program, I was able to enact the program informally with the approval of my management. We did it the McDonald's way, putting a plaque up in the office and adding the names to it quarterly. People also got their picture on the wall, a certificate, and lunch on me. To guarantee it would be taken seriously, we used an employee-nomination process. It was the only way to reinforce that this was "our" effort, and the result was it was embraced by everyone.

Getting extraordinary things done in an organization is hard work. Leaders have to believe they can make a difference, but they also have to enlist others' support, and they have to recognize the contributions of these people or they will never motivate them to perform.

Our Employee-of-the-Quarter program was so successful I expanded it to include contractors. Now we have a Contractor-of-the-Quarter program too. My thinking all along has been to involve everyone in the reforms, and that includes the contractors as well as the civil servants.

In this same way, we introduced employee satisfaction surveys. We started with the civil servants and are now expanding this program to include contractors as well. The best way to get anyone to care about a home or an office or an agency is to create a sense of ownership. I felt we could do that by allowing people the opportunity to identify how to improve things at the Center. Again, it was important to make clear that the vision of what the Center could be was theirs as well as management's.

As the leader in this reform effort, I knew it was critical that I set the tone in the office. Enthusiasm rubs off, after all. First thing every day I stopped by people's offices to say good morning. At first many were taken aback. What's wrong? Had they done something they should be reprimanded for? That was the sort of attitude that existed before I got there. People started to loosen up once it became clear that I was just coming around to say hello, that's all.

I believe a key factor in leading any reform effort is getting people to trust that you care about them. As people's comfort level increased, we were able to use these visits to address office issues they otherwise wouldn't have brought up. It was important first to let them know it was safe to do this. It's hard to imagine anyone feeling safe when the only time the boss comes to visit them is to tell them what they're doing wrong.

One of the things I was concerned about when I stepped into this job was that people in the office were being asked to perform their duties without adequate resources. Since coming to NASA I've watched as people are thrown into the breach. They're usually successful at what they do because they're intelligent,

talented people. But that doesn't make it right. You build a team by helping each other out, and that means running to someone's defense when they need help. It pays big dividends in the long run because then you've got everyone helping each other, and that is the glue that holds the team together. Once that attitude takes hold, nobody sees him or herself isolated any longer when problems arise.

I have many examples of what I mean by people required to work with inadequate resources. For example, when I came on board with Logistics Services, some folks in the office were still working on 386s—at NASA! I heard about a woman on my floor assigned to work on some of our databases with only a 486,

while I had a Pentium. Who needed the better computer, her or me? I immediately requested that the computers be swapped. It's far more important to me that the people I work with have the tools they need to do their jobs than that I have the biggest, baddest machine on the floor.

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One thing we felt we had to do center-wide was train people on what property management was all about. But the last thing we wanted was to drag everyone into an auditorium for a two-hour lecture. People were busy—they had projects, sometimes multiple projects, going on. To make the training convenient for them, we built a web-based program. I helped design it myself, an interactive program that quizzed and evaluated them as they worked their way through it. People appreciated this. The comments we got back said it was an excellent way to conduct a training, and they suggested other programs use this approach.

This touches on one of our biggest reforms of all, getting folks in the office to put customer service on their agenda. When I first came on board, there was little to no customer focus. One way I tried to put it on the agenda was by telling "Sea Stories." These were just stories I brought up to try and get others to see that exceeding customer expectations was something in itself worth striving for. The stories could be anything. Usually, they were just things that happened to me during the day or over the weekend. For example, I bought windshield wiper blades from a guy at the Auto Store. He asked me where my car was parked and I pointed to it in the parking lot. He took the blades out to the car, popped out the old ones, put the new ones in, and then while we were standing out there talking, he asked if there was anything else I needed. He didn't have to go out into the parking lot and put on the new blades, but he was focused on exceeding my expectations and making sure I was a satisfied customer. Where do you think I'm going next time I need something for my car?

Stories like this I hoped would inspire people to do something extra for people. These could be simple things, like sounding extra friendly when they answered the phone, building cordial relationships with the people in other parts of the Center, treating our contractors as team members too. The attention people pay to the customer is probably the most visible difference in how our office operates now from when I started. This customer satisfaction emphasis was rein-

forced by sharing comments from pleased customers at our monthly staff meetings. One employee who adopted this new practice was almost always recognized. During the meetings I would say "and here is an email from a happy customer who wrote, Mr.--," and I would pause and the entire group would say his name. This encouraged others to take pride in being recognized for taking care of their customers.

We've made lots of changes and we've got lots of people to agree the difference has been worth the effort. Many of those old outdated procedures I referred

to earlier are in the process of being reformed. During one major process improvement effort, we used facilitated process improvement sessions with employees, contractors and customers to identify over 500 process improvement opportunities in a 16-week span. We have

already implemented more than 250 of them.

The overarching challenge in reforming an entire office is changing the mindset. You get there slowly, but it can happen. I think our office demonstrates this. To challenge the status quo, you have to inspire a shared vision. Once you do this, enable others to act, and never cease to model the way yourself. Do this from the heart and amazing things can happen.

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LESSONS LEARNED

1. Successful change comes from employing a complementary set of principles: Challenge the Process, Inspire a Shared Vision, Enable Others to Act, Model the Way, and Encourage the Heart. These principles derive from *The Leadership Challenge: How to Keep Getting Extraordinary Things Done in Organizations*, by James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner.
2. Actions speak louder than words. People will draw inspiration from seeing you 'walk' what you 'talk' and thereby follow the path you lead.
3. Stories provide concrete examples of the values you want to instill. Be sure to draw from other areas of life besides just what's going on at the office.
4. Let people know their work is appreciated by recognizing and rewarding those who make a difference.

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